1

The Secret of the “Magnifique” by E. Phillips Oppenheim

The man was awaiting the service of his dinner in the magnificent buffet of the Gare de Lyons. He sat at a table laid for three, on the right-hand side of the entrance and close to the window. From below came the turmoil of the trains. Every few minutes the swing doors opened to admit little parties of travellers. The solitary occupant of the table scarcely ever moved his head. Yet he had always the air of one who watches.

In appearance he was both unremarkable and undistinguished. He was of somewhat less than medium height, of unathletic, almost frail physique. His head was thrust a little forward, as though he were afflicted with a chronic stoop. He wore steel-rimmed spectacles with the air of one who has taken to them too late in life to have escaped the constant habit of peering, which had given his neck an almost stork-like appearance. His hair and think moustache were iron-grey, his fingers long and delicate. The labels upon his luggage were addressed in a trim, scholarly hand:

MR JOHN T. LAXWORTHY

Passenger to ——,

Via Paris.

A maître d’hôtel, who was passing, paused and looked at the two as yet unoccupied places.

‘Monsieur desires the service of his dinner?’ he inquired.

Mr John T. Laxworthy glanced up at the clock and carefully compared the time with his own watch. He answered the man’s inquiry in French which betrayed no sign of any accent.

‘In five minutes,’ he declared, ‘my friends will have arrived. The service of dinner can then proceed.’

The man bowed and withdrew, a little impressed by his customer’s trim precision of speech. Almost as he left the table, the swing doors opened once more to admit another traveller. The new-comer stood on the threshold for a moment, looking around him. He carried a much-labelled dressing-case in his hand, and an umbrella under his arm. He stood firmly upon his feet, and a more thoroughly British, self-satisfied, and obvious person had, to all appearance, never climbed those stairs. He wore a travelling-suit of dark grey, a check ulster, broad-toed boots, and a Homburg hat. His complexion was sandy, and his figure distinctly inclined towards corpulence. He wore scarcely noticeable side-whiskers, and his chin and upper lip were clean-shaven. His eyes were bright and his mouth had an upward and humorous turn. The initials upon his bag were W.F.A., and a printed label upon the same indicated his full name as:

MR W. FORREST ANDERSON,

Passenger to ——,

Via Paris.

His brief contemplation of the room was soon over. His eyes fell upon the solitary figure, now deep in a book,seated at the table on his right. He set down his dressing-case by the side of the wall, yielded his coat and hat to the attendant vestiaire, and, with the pleased smile of one who greets an old friend approached the table at which Mr John T. Laxworthy sat waiting.

The idiosyncrasies of great men are always worth noting, and Mr John T. Laxworthy was, without a doubt, foredoomed from the cradle to a certain measure of celebrity. His method of receiving the new-comer was in some respects curious. From the moment when the swing doors had been pushed

open and the portly figure of Mr Forrest Anderson had crossed the threshold, his eyes had not once quitted the heavy-looking volume, the contents of which appeared so completely to absorb his attention. Even now, when his friend stood by his side, he did not at once look up. Slowly, and with his eyes still riveted upon the pages he was studying, he held out his left hand.

‘I am glad to see you, Mr Anderson,’ he said. Sit down by my side here. You are nearly ten minutes late. I have delayed ordering the wine until your arrival. Shall it be white or red?’

Mr Anderson shook with much heartiness the limp fingers which had been offered to him, and took the seat indicated. His friend’s eccentricity of manner appeared to be familiar to him, and he offered no comment upon it.

‘White, if you please—Chablis of a dry brand, for choice. Sorry if I’m late. Beastly crossing, beastly crowded train. Glad to be here, anyhow.’

Mr. John T. Laxworthy closed his book with a little sigh of regret, and placed a marker within it. He then carefully adjusted his spectacles and made a deliberate survey of his companion. Finally he nodded, slowly and approvingly.

‘How about the partridges?’ he inquired.

‘Bad,’ Mr Anderson declared, with a sigh. ‘It was one storm in June that did it. We went light last season, though, and I’m putting down forty brace of Hungarians. You see——’

Mr Laxworthy touched the table with his forefinger, and his companion almost automatically stopped.

‘Quite excellent,’ the former pronounced dryly. ‘Don’t overdo it. I should think that this must be Sydney.’

Mr Anderson glanced towards the entrance. Then he looked back at his companion a little curiously. Mr Laxworthy had not raised his head.

‘How the dickens did you know that it was Sydney?’ he demanded.

Mr Laxworthy smiled at the tablecloth.

‘I have a special sense for that sort of thing,’ he remarked. ‘I like to use my eyes as seldom as possible.’

A young man who had just completed a leisurely survey of the room dropped his monocle and came towards them. From the tips of his shiny tan shoes to his smoothly brushed hair, he was unmistakable. He was young, he was English, he was well-bred, he was an athlete. He had a pleasant, unintelligent face, a natural and prepossessing ease of manner. He handed his ulster to the attendant vestiaire and beamed upon the two men.

‘How are you, Forrest? How do you do, Mr Laxworthy?’ he exclaimed. ‘Looking jolly fit, both of you.’

Mr Laxworthy raised his glass. He looked thoughtfully at the wine for a moment, to be sure that it was free from any atom of cork. Then he inclined his head in turn to each of his companions.

‘I am glad to see you both,’ he said. ‘On the whole, I think that I may congratulate you. You have done well. I drink to our success.’

The toast was drunk in silence. Mr Forrest Anderson set down his glass—empty—with a little murmur of content.

‘It is something,’ he remarked, vigorously attacking a new course, ‘to have satisfied our chief.’

The young man opposite to him subjected the dish which was being offered to a long and deliberate

survey through his eyeglass, and finally refused it.

‘Give me everything in France except the beef,’ he declared. ‘Must be the way they cut it, I think. Quite right, Andy,’ he went on, glancing across the table. ‘To have satisfied such a critic as the chief here is an achievement indeed. Having done it, let us hear what he proposes to do with us.’

‘In other words,’ Mr Anderson put in, ‘what is the game to be?’

There was a short pause. Mr John T. Laxworthy was continuing his repast—which was, by the by, of a much more frugal character than that offered to his guests—without any sign of having even heard the inquiry addressed to him by his companions. They knew him, however, and they were content to wait. Presently he commenced to peel an apple and simultaneously to unburden himself.

‘A great portion of this last year,’ he said, ‘which you two have spent apparently with profit in carrying out my instructions, I myself have devoted to the perfection of a certain scholarly tone which I feel convinced is my proper environment. Incidentally, I have devoted myself to the various schools of philosophy.’

‘I will take a liqueur,’ decided the young man, whose name was Sydney—’something brain-stimulating. A Grand Marnier, waiter, if you please.’

‘The same for me,’ Mr Forrest Anderson put in hastily. ‘Also, in a few moments, some black coffee.’

Mr Laxworthy did not by the flicker of an eyelid betray the slightest annoyance at these interruptions. He waited, indeed, until the liqueurs had been brought before he spoke again, continuing the while in a leisurely fashion the peeling and preparing of his apple. Even for some time after his friends had again offered him their undivided attention, he continued his task of extricating from it, with precise care, every fragment of core.

‘In one very interesting treatise,’ he recommenced at last, ‘I found several obvious truths ingeniously put. A certain decadence in the material prosperity of an imaginary state is clearly proved to be due to a too blind following of the tenets of what is known as the hysterical morality, as against the decrees of what we might call expediency. A little sentiment, like garlic in cookery, is a good thing; too much is fatal. A little—sufficient—morality is excellent; a superabundance disastrous. Society is divided into two classes, those who have and those who desire to have. The one must always prey upon the other. They are, therefore, always changing places. It is this continued movement which lends energy to the human race. As soon as it is suspended, degeneration must follow as a matter of course. It is for those who recognize this great truth to follow and obey its tenets.’

‘May we not hear more definitely what it is that you propose?’ Anderson asked, a little anxiously.

‘We stand,’ Mr Laxworthy replied, ‘always upon the threshold of the land of adventure. At no place are we nearer to it than in this room. It is our duty to use our energies to assist in the great principles of movement to which I have referred. We must take our part in the struggle. On which side? you naturally ask. Are we to be amongst those who have, and who, through weakness or desire, must yield to others? or shall we take our place amongst the more intellectual, the more highly gifted minority, those who assist the progress of the world by helping towards the redistribution of its wealth? Sydney, how much money have you?’

‘Three hundred and ninety-five francs and a few coppers,’ the young man answered promptly. ‘It sounds more in French.’

‘And you, Anderson?’

Mr Forrest Anderson coughed.

‘With the exception of a five-franc piece,’ he admitted, ‘I am worthy exactly as much as I shall be able to borrow from you presently.’

‘In that case,’ Mr Laxworthy said dryly, ‘our position is preordained. We take our place amongst the aggressors.’

The young man whose name was Sydney dropped his eyeglass.

‘One moment,’ he said. ‘Andy here and I have exposed our financial impecuniosity at your request. It can scarcely be a surprise to you, considering that we have practically lived upon your bounty for the last year. It seems only fair that you should imitate our candour. There were rumours, a short time ago, of a considerable sum of money to which you had become entitled. To tell you the truth,’ the young man went on, leaning a little across the table, ‘we were almost afraid, or rather I was, that you might abandon this shadowy enterprise of ours.’

Mr John T. Laxworthy, without being discomposed, which was almost too much to expect of a man with such perfect poise, seemed nevertheless taken aback. He opened his lips as though to make some reply, and closed them again. When he did speak, it was grudgingly.

‘No successful enterprise, or series of enterprises, can be conducted without capital,’ he said. ‘I am free to admit that I am in possession of a certain amount of that indispensable commodity. I do not feel myself called upon to state the exact amount, but such money as is required for our journeyings, or for any enterprise in which we become engaged will be forthcoming.’

Mr Anderson stroked his chin meditatively.

‘I am sure,’ he said, ‘that that sounds quite satisfactory.’

‘I call it jolly fine business,’ the young man declared. ‘There is just one thing more upon which I think we ought to have an understanding. You say that we are to take our place amongst the aggressors. Exactly what does that mean?’

Mr Laxworthy looked at him coldly.

‘It means precisely what I choose that it shall mean,’ he replied. ‘Any enterprise or adventure in which we may become engaged will be selected by me, and by me only. My chief aim—I have no objection to telling you this—is to make life tolerable for ourselves, to escape that dull monotony of idleness and, incidentally, to embrace any opportunity which may present itself to enrich our exchequer. Have you any objection to that?’

‘None,’ Mr Forrest Anderson declared.

‘None at all,’ Sydney echoed.

‘There are three of us,’ Mr Laxworthy went on. ‘We each have our use. Mine is the chief of all. I supply the brains. My position must be unquestioned.’

‘For my part, I am willing enough,’ Sydney remarked. ‘It’s been your show from the first.’

Mr Forrest Anderson, who had dined well and forgotten his empty pockets, laughed a genial laugh.

‘I agree,’ he declared. ‘Tell us, when and where do we start, and shall our first enterprise be Pickwickian, or am I to play the Sancho Panza to your on Quixote and Sydney’s donkey?’

Mr Laxworthy regarded his associates coldly. There was a silence, a silence which became somehow an ominous thing. Around them reigned a babel of tongues, a clatter of crockery. Below, the turmoil of the busy station, the shrieking of departing trains. But at the table presided over by Mr Laxworthy no word was spoken. Mr Anderson’s geniality faded away. His young companions amiable nonchalance entirely deserted him. Either of them would have given worlds to have been able to dispel the strange effect of this silence with some casual remark. But upon them lay the spell

of the conqueror. The little man at the head of the table held them in the hollow of his hand.

‘It may be,’ he said, breaking at last that curious silence, ‘that no other occasion will ever arise when it will be necessary to speak to you in this fashion. So now listen. You are right to indulge in the urbanities of existence. Keep always the smile upon your lips, if you can, but underneath let the real consciousness of life be ever present. I do not claim for myself the genius of a Pickwick or the valour of a Don Quixote. On the other hand, we are not paltry aggressors against Society, failing in one enterprise, successful in the next, a mark for ridicule and contempt one moment, and for good-humoured sufferance the next. I do not ask you to embark with me as farceurs upon a series of enterprises carried out upon the principle of “Let us do our best and chance the rest.” It is just possible that the fates may be against us, and that we may live together for many months the lives of ordinary and moderately commonplace human beings. I ask you to remember that no sense of danger would ever deter me from embarking upon any adventure which I deemed likely to afford us either diversion, wealth, or satisfaction of any sort whatsoever. We are not pleasure-seekers. We are men whose one end and aim is to escape from the chains of everyday existence, to avoid the humdrum life of our fellows. Therein may lie for us many and peculiar dangers. Adopt, if you will, the motto of the pagans—“Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!” So long as you remember. Will you drink with me to that remembrance?’

Mr Laxworthy, as he grew less enigmatic in his speech, became, if possible, more whimsical in his mannerisms. He ordered the best Cognac, at which he himself scarcely glanced, and turned with a little sigh of relief to his book. In the midst of this hubbub of sounds and bustle of diners he continued to read with every appearance of studious enjoyment. His two companions were content enough, apparently, to relax after their journey and enjoy their cigars. Nevertheless, they once or twice glanced curiously at their chief. One of these glances he seemed, although he never raised his head, to have intercepted, for, carefully marking the place in his book, he pushed it away and addressed them.

‘Our plans,’ he announced abruptly, ‘are not yet wholly made. We wait here for—shall we call it an inspiration? Perhaps, even at this moment, it is not far from us.’

Mr Forrest Anderson and his vis-à-vis turned as though instinctively towards the door. At that moment two men who had just passed through were standing upon the threshold. One was rather past middle-age, corpulent, with red features of a coarse type. His companion, who was leaning upon his arm, was much younger, and a very different sort of person. He was tall and exceedingly thin. His features were wasted almost to emaciation, his complexion was ghastly. He seemed to have barely strength enough to move.

‘They are coming to the table next to us,’ Laxworthy said, in a very low tone. ‘The address upon their luggage will be interesting.’

Slowly the two men came down the room. As Laxworthy had expected, they took possession of an empty table close at hand. The young man sank into his chair with a little sigh of exhaustion.

‘A liqueur brandy, quick,’ the older man ordered, as he accepted the menu from a waiter. ‘My friend is fatigued.’

Sydney took the bottle which stood upon their own table, poured out a wineglassful, and, rising to his feet, stepped across and accosted the young man.

‘Do me the favour of drinking this, sir,’ he begged. ‘The service here is slow and the brandy excellent. I can see that you are in need of it. It may serve, too, as an aperitif.’

The young man accepted it with a smile of gratitude. His companion echoed his thanks.

‘Very much obliged to you, sir,’ he declared. ‘My friend here is a little run down and finds travelling

fatiguing.'

'A passing malady, I trust?' Sydney remarked, preparing to return to his seat.

'A legacy from that cursed graveyard—South Africa,' the older man growled.

Sydney stepped back and resumed his seat. In a few minutes he leaned across the table.

'The Paradise Hotel, Hyères,' he said under his breath.

Mr Laxworthy looked thoughtful.

'You surprise me,' he admitted.

'What do you know of them?' Anderson inquired.

Mr Laxworthy shrugged his shoulders.

'Not much beyond the obvious facts,' he admitted. 'Even you, my friends, are not wholly deceived, I presume, by the young man's appearance?'

They evidently were. Their faces expressed their non-comprehension.

Mr Laxworthy sighed.

'You must both of you seek to develop the minor senses,' he enjoined reprovingly. 'Your powers of observation, for instance, are, without doubt, exceedingly stunted. Let me assure you, for example, that your sympathy for that young man is entirely wasted.'

'You mean that he is not really ill?' Sydney asked incredulously.

'Most certainly he is not as ill as he pretends,' Mr Laxworthy declared dryly. 'If you look at him more closely you will discover a certain theatricality in his pose which of itself should undeceive you.'

'You know who he is?' Sydney asked.

'I believe so,' Laxworthy admitted. 'I can hazard a guess even to his companion's identity. But—the Paradise Hotel, Hyères! Order some fresh coffee. We are not ready to leave yet. Anderson, watch the door. Sydney, don't let them notice it, but watch our friends there. Something may happen.'

A tall, broad-shouldered man with a fair moustache and wearing a long travelling-coat had entered the buffet. He stood there for a moment looking around, as though in search of a table. The majority of those present suffered his scrutiny, unnoticing, indifferent, naturally absorbed in themselves and their own affairs. Not so these two men who had last entered. Every nerve of the young man's body seemed to have become tense. His hand had stolen into the pocket of his travelling-coat, and with a little thrill Sydney saw the glitter of steel half shown for a moment between his interlocked fingers. No longer was this man's countenance the countenance of an invalid. It had become instead like the face of a wolf. His front teeth were showing—he had moved slightly so as to give his arm full play. It seemed as though a tragedy were at hand.

The man who had been standing on the threshold deposited his handbag upon the floor near the wall, and came down the room. Laxworthy and his two associates watched. Their neighbours at the net table sat in well simulate indifference, only once more Sydney saw the gleam of hidden steel flash for a moment from the depths of that ulster pocket. The new-comer made no secret of his destination. He advanced straight to their table and came to a standstill immediately in front of them. Both the stout man and his invalid companion looked up at him as one might regard a stranger.

To all appearance Laxworthy was engrossed in his book. Sydney and Anderson watched and listened, but of all the words which passed between those three men, not one was audible. No

chance of countenance on the part of any one of the three indicated even the nature of that swift and fluent interchange of words. Only at the last, the elder man touched the label attached to his dressing-bag, and they heard his words:

‘The Paradise Hotel, Hyères. We shall be there for at least a month.’

The new-comer stood perfectly still for several moments, as though deliberating. The young man’s hand came an inch or two from his pocket. Chance and tragedy trifled together in the midst of that crowded room, unnoticed save by those three at the adjoining table. Then, as though inspired with a sudden resolution, this stranger, whose coming had seemed so unwelcome, raised his hat slightly to the two men with whom he had been talking, and turned away.

‘The Paradise Hotel at Hyères,’ he repeated. ‘I shall know, then, where to find you.’

The little scene was over. Nothing had happened. Nevertheless, the fingers of the young man, as his hand emerged from his pocket, were moist and damp, and his appearance was now veritably ghastly. His companion watched, with a deep purple flush upon his face, the passing of this stranger who had accosted him. He had the appearance of one threatened with apoplexy.

‘One might be interested to know the meaning of these things,’ Sydney murmured softly.

Their chief looked up from his book.

‘Then one must follow—to the Paradise Hotel,’ he remarked.

‘I begin to believe,’ Anderson declared, ‘that it is our destination.’

‘There is no hurry,’ Laxworthy replied. ‘Grimes once told me that this room in which we are now sitting was perhaps the most interesting rendezvous in Europe. Grimes was at the head of the Foreign Department at Scotland Yard in those days, and he knew what he was talking about.’

A woman, wrapped in magnificent furs, who was passing their table, was run into by a clumsy waiter and dropped a satchel from her finger. Sydney hastened to restore it to her, and was rewarded by a gracious smile in which was mingled a certain amount of recognition.

‘You seem fated to be my Good Samaritan to-day,’ she remarked.

‘It is my good fortune,’ the young man replied. ‘Can I help you to get a table or anything? This place is always overcrowded.’

She motioned with her head to where a maître d’hôtel was holding a chair for her.

‘It is already arranged,’ she said. ‘Perhaps we shall meet in the Luxe afterwards, if you are going south.’

‘You are travelling far?’ Sydney ventured to inquire.

‘Only to the outskirts of the Riviera,’ she answered. ‘I am going to Hyères—to the Paradise Hotel. Why do you smile?’

‘My friends and I,’ he explained, ‘have met here to decide upon the whereabouts of a little holiday we mean to spend together. We were at that moment discussing a suggestion to proceed to the same place.’

She gave him a little farewell nod as she passed on.

‘If you decide to do so,’ she declared, ‘it will give me great pleasure to meet you again.’

‘I congratulate you,’ Laxworthy remarked dryly, as Sydney resumed his seat. ‘A most interesting acquaintance, yours.’

‘Do you know who she is?’ the young man asked. ‘I only met her on the train.’

His chief nodded gravely.

‘She is Madame Bertrand,’ he replied. ‘Her husband at one time held a post in the Foreign Office, under Fauré. For some reason or other he was discredited, and since then he has died. There was some scandal about Madame Bertrand herself, and some papers which were missing from her husband’s portfolio, but nothing definite ever came to light.’

‘Madame seems to survive the loss of her husband,’ Mr Forrest Anderson remarked, looking across at her admiringly.

Laxworthy held up his hand. Almost for the first time he was sitting upright in his chair, his head still thrust forward in his usual attitude, his eyes fixed upon the door. The thin fingers of his right hand were spread flat upon the tablecloth.

‘We have finished, for the moment, with the Madame Bertrands of the world,’ he announced. ‘After all, they are for the pigmies. Here comes food for giants.’

The light of battle was in Laxworthy’s eyes. The greatest of men have their moments of weakness, and even Laxworthy, for that brief space of time, forgot himself and his pose toward the world. His thin lips were a little parted, the veins at the sides of his forehead stood out like blue cords. His lips moved slowly.

‘You can both look,’ he said. ‘They are probably used to it. You will see the two greatest personages on earth.’

His companions gazed eagerly toward the door. Two men were standing there, being relieved of their wraps and directed toward a table. One was middle-aged, grey-headed, with a somewhat worn but keen face. The other was taller, with black hair streaked with grey, a face half Jewish, half romantic, a skin like ivory.

‘The greatest men in the world?’ Sydney repeated, under his breath. ‘You are joking, chief. I never saw even a photograph of either of them before in my life.’

‘The one nearest you,’ Laxworthy announced, ‘is Mr Freeling Poignton. The newspapers will tell you that his fortune exceeds the national debt of any country in the world. He is, without doubt, the richest man who was ever born. There has never yet breathed an emperor whose upraised finger could provoke or stop a war, whose careless word could check the prosperity of the proudest nation that ever breathed. These things Mr Freeling Poignton can do.’

‘And the other?’ Anderson whispered.

‘It is chance,’ Mr Laxworthy said softly, ‘which placed a sceptre of unlimited power in the hands of Richard Freeling Poignton. It is his own genuis which has made the Marquis Lefant the greatest power in the diplomatic world. It was his decision which brought about war between Russian and Japan. It was he who stopped the declaration of war against Germany by our own Prime Minister at the time of the Algeciras difficulty. It was he who offered a million pounds to bring the Tsar of Russia to Germany—and he did it. There is little that he cannot do.’

‘Is he a German?’ Anderson asked.

‘No one knows of what race he comes,’ Mr Laxworthy replied. ‘No one knows what country is really nearest to his heart. It is his custom to accept commissions or refuse them, according to his own belief as to their influence upon international peace. They say that he has English blood in his veins. If so, he has been a sorry friend to his native land.’

‘We seem,’ Sydney remarked, ‘to have chosen a very fortunate evening for our little dinner here. The place is full of interesting people. I wonder where those two are going.’

A maître d’hôtel, whose respect had been gained by the lavish orders from their table, paused and

whispered confidentially in Mr Laxworthy's ear.

'The gentleman down there, sir,' he announced, 'the grey gentleman with his own servant waiting upon him, is Mr Freeling Poignton, the great American multi-millionaire.'

Laxworthy nodded slowly.

'I thought I recognized him by his photographs,' he said. 'Is he going to Monte Carlo?'

The attendant shook his head.

'I was speaking to them a moment ago, sir,' he declared. 'Mr Poignton has been here a good many times. He and his friend are going for a fortnight's quiet to the Paradise Hotel at Hyères.'

The maître d'hôtel passed on with another bow. The three men looked at one another. Mr Laxworthy glanced at the clock.

'Sydney,' he said, 'will you step down into the bureau and find out whether it is possible to get three seats in the train de luxe?'

'For Hyères?' Sydney asked.

Mr Laxworthy assented gravely.

'Certainly,' he said. 'You might at the same time telegraph to the hotel.'

'To the Paradise Hotel?'

Mr Laxworthy inclined his head.

Part 2

A black cloud, long and with jagged edges, passed away from the face of the moon. The plain of Hyères was gradually revealed—the cypress trees, tall and straight, the shimmering olive trees with their ghostly foliage, the fields of violets, the level vineyards. And beyond, the phalanx of lights on the warships lying in the bay. The hotel on the hill-side, freshly painted and spotlessly white, stood sharply out against the dark background. The whole world was becoming visible.

Upon the balcony of one of the rooms upon the second floor a man was standing with his back to the wall. He looked around at the flooding moonlight and swore softly to himself. Decidedly, things were turning out ill with him. From the adjoining balcony a thin rope was hanging, swaying very slightly in the night breeze. The young man gazed helplessly at the end, which had slipped from his fingers, and which was hanging just now over some flower-beds. He was face to face with the almost insoluble problem of how to regain the shelter of his own room.

From the gardens below came the melancholy cry of a passing owl. From the white, barnlike farmhouse, perched on the mountain-side in the distance, came the bark of a dog. Then again there was silence. The man looked back into the room from which he had escaped, and down at the end of that swinging rope. He was indeed on the horns of a dilemma. To return into the room was insanity. To stay where he was was to risk being seen by the earliest passerby or the first person who chanced to look out from a window. To try to pass to his own veranda without the aid of that rope which he had lost was an impossibility.

It was already five minutes since he had crept out from the room and had let the rope slip from his fingers. The owl had finished his mournful serenade, the watch-dog on the mountain-side slept. The deep silence of the hours before dawn brooded over the land. The man, fiercely impatient though he was to escape, was constrained to wait. There seemed to be nothing which he could do.

Then again the silence of the night was strangely, almost harshly broken, this time from the interior

of the hotel. An alarm bell, harsh and discordant, rang out a brazen note of terror. Lights suddenly flashed in the windows, footsteps hurried along the corridor. The man outside upon the balcony set his teeth and cursed. Detection now seemed unavoidable.

The room behind him was speedily invaded. Madame Bertrand, in a dressing-gown whose transparent simplicity had been the triumph of a celebrated establishment in the Rue de la Paix, her beautiful hair tied up only with pink ribbon, her eyes kindling with excitement, received a stream of agitated callers. The floor waiter, three guests in various states of déshabille, and finally the manager, breathless with haste, all claimed her attention at the same time.

‘It was I who rang the danger-bell,’ madame declared indignantly. ‘In an hotel where such things are possible, it is well, indeed, that one should be able to sound the alarm. There has been a man in my rooms.’

‘But it is unheard of, madame!’ the manager replied.

‘It is nevertheless true,’ madame insisted. ‘Not two minutes since, I opened my eyes and he disappeared into my sitting-room. I saw him distinctly. I could not recognize him, for he kept his face turned away. Either he has escaped through the sitting-room door and down the corridor, or he is still there, or he is hiding in this room.’

‘The jewels of madame!’ the manager gasped. ‘I tremble in every limb. How can I know whether or not I have been robbed?’

‘The pearls of madame,’ he persisted—‘the string of pearls?’

‘That is safe,’ madame admitted. ‘My diamond collar, too, is in its place.’

The manager and two of the guests searched the sitting-room, which opened to the left from the bedroom. Others spread themselves over the hotel to calm fears of the startled guests, and to assure everybody that there was no fire and that nothing particular had happened. The search was, of necessity, not a long one; there was no one in the sitting-room. The manager and his helpers returned.

‘The room is empty, madame,’ the former declared.

‘Then the burglar has escaped!’ she cried.

Monsieur Helder went down on his knees and peered in vain under the bed.

‘Madame is sure,’ he inquired, raising his head with some temerity but remaining upon his knees —‘madame is absolutely convinced that it was not an illusion—the fragment of a dream, perhaps? It is strange that there should have been time for anyone to have escaped.’

‘A dream indeed!’ madame declared indignantly. ‘I do not dream such things, Monsieur Helder.’

Monsieur Helder dived again under the valence. It was just at that moment that Madame Bertrand, gazing into the plate-glass mirror of the wardrobe, received a shock. Distinctly she saw a man’s face reflected there. With the predominant instinct of her sex aroused, she opened her lips to scream—and just as suddenly closed them again. She stood for a moment quite still, her hand pressed to her side. Then she turned her head and looked out of the French windows which led on to the balcony. There was nothing to be seen. She looked across at Monsieur Helder, whose head had disappeared inside the wardrobe. Then she stole up to the window and glanced once more on to the balcony.

‘Madame,’ Monsieur Helder declared, ‘the room is empty. Your sitting-room is also empty. There remains,’ he added, with a sudden thought, ‘only the balcony.’

He advanced a step. Madame Bertrand, however, remained motionless. She was standing in front of the window.

‘The balcony I have examined myself,’ she said quietly. ‘There is no one there. Besides, I am not one of the English cranks who sleep always with the damp night air filling their rooms. My windows are bolted.’

‘In that case, madame,’ Monsieur Helder declared, with a little shrug of the shoulders, ‘we must conclude that the intruder escaped through your sitting-room door into the corridor. Madame can at least assure me that nothing of great value is missing from her belongings?’

Madame Bertrand, though pale, was graciously pleased to reassure the inquirer.

‘You have reason, my friend,’ she admitted. ‘Nothing of great value is missing. The shock, however, I shall not get over for days. After this, Monsieur Helder, you will not banish my maid again to that horrible annexe. Whoever occupies the next room to mine here must give it up. Not another night will I slee here alone and unprotected.’

Monsieur Helder bowed.

‘Madame,’ he said, ‘the adjoining room is occupied by Mr Sydney Wing, an Englishman, whom madame will perhaps recollect. He is, I am sure, a man of gallantry. After the adventure of tonight he will doubtless offer to vacate his room for the convenience of madame’s maid.’

‘It must be arranged,’ madame insisted.

Monsieur Helder backed toward the door.

‘If madame would like her maid for the rest of the night—’ he suggested.

Madame Bertrand shook her head.

‘Not now,’ she replied. ‘I will not have the poor girl disturbed. After what has passed, she would lie here in terror. As for me, I shall lock all my doors, and perhaps, after all, I shall sleep.’

Monsieur Helder drew himself up upon the threshold. He was not a very imposing-looking object in his trousers and a crumpled shirt, but he permitted himself a bow.

‘Madame,’ he said, ‘will accept this expression of my infinite regret that her slumbers should have been so disturbed.’

‘I thank you very much, Monsieur Helder,’ she answered graciously. ‘Good night!’

Monsieur Helder executed his bow and disappeared. Madame paused for a moment to listen to his footsteps down the corridor. Then she moved forward to the door and locked it. For a few seconds longer she hesitated. Then she walked deliberately to the French windows, threw them open, and stepped on to the balcony.

‘Good evening, Monsieur Sydney Wing—or rather good morning!’

The young man gripped for a moment the frail balustrade. It must be confessed that he had lost entirely his savoir-faire.

‘Madame!’ he faltered.

She pointed to the open doors.

‘Inside!’ she whispered imperatively—‘inside at once!’

She pointed to the swinging cord. The young man stepped only too willingly inside the room. She followed him and closed the windows.

‘You will gather, Monsieur Sydney Wing,’ she said, ‘that I am disposed to spare you. I knew that you were outside, even while my room was being searched. I preferred first to hear your explanation, before I gave you up to be treated as a common burglar.’

The young man's courage was returning fast. He lifted his head. His eyes were full of gratitude—or what, at any rate, gleamed like gratitude.

'Oh, madame,' he murmured, 'you are too gracious!'

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. She looked at him not unkindly.

'You will come this way,' she said, leading him into the sitting-room and turning on the electric light. 'Now tell me, monsieur, and tell me the truth if you would leave this room a free man and without scandal. When I saw you first you were bending over that table. Upon it was my necklace, my earrings, a lace scarf, my chatelaine and vanity box, a few of my rings, perhaps a jewelled pin or two. Now tell me exactly what you came for, what you have taken, and why?'

'Madame,' he said, 'think. Was there nothing else upon that table?'

She shook her head.

'I can think of nothing,' she acknowledged.

'To-night,' he continued, 'you were scarcely so kind to me. We danced together, it is true, but there were many others. There was the Admiral—the French Admiral, for instance. Madame was favourably disposed towards him.'

She was a coquette, and she shrugged her shoulders as she smiled.

'Why not? Admiral Christodor is a very charming man. He dances well, he entertains upon his wonderful battleship most lavishly, he is a very desirable and delightful acquaintance. And you, Monsieur Sydney Wing, what have you to say that I should not dance and be friendly with this gentleman?'

The young man was feeling his feet upon the ground. Nevertheless, he continued to look serious.

'Alas!' he said, 'I have no right to find fault. Yet two nights ago madame gave me the rose I asked for. To-night—you remember?'

She looked at him softly yet steadily. Then she glanced at the table and back again into his face.

'You told me,' he continued, 'that the rose belonged to him who dared to pluck it.'

'It is a saying,' she murmured. 'I was not in earnest.'

Mr Sydney Wing sighed deeply.

'Madame,' he declared, 'I come of a literal nation. When we love, the word of a woman means much to us. To-night there seemed nothing dearer to me in life than the possession of that rose. I told myself that your challenge was accepted. I told myself that to-night I would sleep with that rose on the pillow by my side.'

Slowly he unbuttoned his coat. From the breast pocket he drew out a handkerchief and unfolded it. In the centre, crushed, and devoid of many of its petals, but still retaining its shape and perfume, lay a dark red rose.

Madame Bertrand moved a step towards him.

'Monsieur,' she cried incredulously, yet with some tenderness in her tone—'monsieur, you mean to tell me that for the sake of that rose you climbed from your balcony to mine, you ran these risks?'

'For the sake of this rose, madame, and all that it means to me,' he answered.

She drew a long sigh. Then she held out her hand. Again he raised it to his lips.

'Monsieur Sydney,' she said, 'I have done your countrymen an injustice all my life. I had not thought such sentiment was possible in any one of them. I am very glad indeed that when I saw

your face reflected in the mirror of my wardrobe, something urged me to send Monsieur Helder away. I am very glad.'

'Madame.'

She held up her finger. Already the faint beginning of dawn was stealing into the sky. From the farmhouse away on the hill-side a cock commenced to crow.

'Monsieur,' she whispered, 'not another word. I have risked my reputation to save you. See, the door is before you. Unlock it softly. Be sure there is no one in the corridor when you leave. Do not attempt to close it. I myself in a few minutes' time will return and do that.'

'But Madame—' he begged.

She pointed imploringly towards the door, but there was tenderness in her farewell glance.

'Tomorrow we will talk,' she promised. 'Tomorrow night, if you should fancy my roses, perhaps I may be more kind. Good night!'

She stole back to her room and sat on the edge of her bed. Very noiselessly the young man opened the door of the sitting-room, glance up and down, and with swift, silent footsteps made his way to his own apartment. Madame, some few minutes later, closed the door behind him, slowly slipped off her dressing-gown, an curled herself once more in her bed. Mr Sydney Wing, in the adjoining room, lit a cigarette and mixed himself a whisky-and-soda. There were drops of perspiration still upon his forehead as he stepped out on to the balcony and wound up his rope.

****

It was the most cheerful hour of the day at the Paradise Hotel—the hour before luncheon. A swarthy Italian was singing love-songs on the gravel sweep to the music of a guitar. The very air was filled with sunshine. A soft south wind was laden with perfumes from the violet farm below. Everyone seemed to be out of doors, promenading, or sitting about in little groups. Mr Laxworthy and Mr Forrest Anderson had just passed along the front and were threading their way up the winding path which led through the pine woods at the back of the hotel. Mr Lenfield, the invalid young man, was lying in a sheltered corner, taking a sun-bath; his companion by his side smoking a large cigar and occasionally reading extracts from a newspaper. The pretty American girl, who was one of the features of the place, and Madame Bertrand, were missing, the former because she was playing golf with Sydney Wing, the latter because she never rose until luncheon-time. Mr Freeling Poignton and the Marquis Lefant were sitting a little way up amongst the pine trees. Mr Freeling Poignton was smoking his morning cigar. Lefant was leaning forward, his eyes fixed steadily upon that streak of blue Mediterranean. In his hand he held his watch.

'I am quite sure,' he said softly, 'that I can rely upon my information. At a quarter past twelve precisely the torpedo is to be fired.'

'Which is the Magnifique, anyway?' Mr Freeling Poignton inquired.

Lefant pointed to the largest of the grey battleships which were riding at anchor. Then his fingers slowly traversed the blue space until it paused at a black object, like a derelict barge, set out very near the island of Hyères. He glanced at his watch.

'A quarter past,' he muttered. 'Look! My God!'

The black object had disappeared. A column of white water rose gracefully into the air and descended. It was finished. Lefant leaned towards his companion.

'You and I,' he said, 'have seen a thing which is going to change the naval history of the future. You and I alone can understand why the French Admiralty have given up building battleships, why even their target practice here and at Cherbourg continues as a matter of form only.'

Mr Freeling Poignton withdrew his cigar from his mouth.

‘I can’t say,’ he admitted, ‘that I have ever given any particular attention to these implements of warfare, because I hate them all; but there’s nothing new, anyway, in a torpedo. What’s the difference between this one and the ordinary sort?’

‘I will tell you in a very few words,’ Lefant answered. ‘This one can be fired at a range of five miles, and relied upon to hit a mark little larger than the plate of a battleship with absolutely scientific accuracy. There is no question of aim at all. Just as you work out an exact spot in a surveying expedition by scientific instruments, so you can decide precisely the spot which that torpedo shall hit. It travels at a pace of ten miles a minute, and it has a charge which has never been equalled.’

Mr Freeling Poignton shivered a little, as he dropped the ash of his cigar.

‘I’d like to electrocute the ma who invented it,’ he declared tersely.

Lefant shook his head.

‘You are wrong,’ he replied. ‘The man who invented that torpedo is the friend of your scheme and not the enemy. Listen. It is your desire—is it not—the great ambition of your life, to secure for the world universal peace?’

Mr Freeling Poignton thrust his hands into his trousers pockets.

‘Marquis,’ he said, ‘there is no man breathing who could say how much I am worth. Capitalize my present income and you might call it five hundred million pounds. Put a quarter of a million somewhere in the bank for me, and I’d give the rest to see every army in Europe disbanded, every warship turned into a trading vessel, and every soldier and sailor turned into the factories or upon the land to become honest, productive units.’

‘Just so,’ Lefant assented. ‘It may sound a little Utopian, but it is magnificent. Now listen. You will never induce the rulers of the world to look upon this question reasonably, because every nation is jealous of some other, and no one is great enough to take the lead. The surest of all ways to prevent war is to reduce the art of killing to such a certainty that it becomes an absurdity even to take the field. What nation will build battleships which can be destroyed with the touch of a finger at any time, from practically any distance? I tell you that this invention, which only one or two people in the world outside of that battleship yonder know of at present, is the beginning of the end of all naval warfare. There is only one thing to be done—to drive this home. No nation must be allowed to keep the secret for her own. It must belong to all.’

Mr Freeling Poignton nodded thoughtfully.

‘I begin to understand,’ he remarked. ‘Guess that’s where you come in, isn’t it?’

‘I hope so,’ Lefant assented. ‘I have already spent a hundred thousand dollars of your money, but I think I have had value for it.’

‘Say, why don’t you treat this matter as we should on the other side?’ Mr Freeling Poignton demanded. ‘It’s all very well to bribe these petty officers and such-like, but the admiral’s your man. Remember that the money-bags of the world are behind you.’

Lefant smiled faintly.

‘Alas!’ he exclaimed, ‘the admiral belongs to a race little known in the world of commerce. Money-bags which reached to the sky would never buy him. There are others on the ship who are mine, and with the information I have the rest should be possible.’

Mr Freeling Poignton frowned. He disliked very much to hear of a man who denied the

omnipotence of money. He felt like the king of some foreign country to whom a stranger had refused obeisance.

‘Well, you’ve got to run this thing,’ he remarked, ‘and I suppose you know what kind of lunatics you’ve got to deal with. Seems to me the most difficult job is for you to get on the battleship at all without the admiral’s consent.’

Lefant kicked a pebble away from beneath his feet.

‘That is the chief difficulty,’ he admitted. ‘I was rather hoping that Madame Bertrand might have been of use to me there. She has been devoting herself to the admiral for some days, and last night she got pass from him, allowing the bearer to visit the ship at any time, with access to any part of it. This morning, however, she declares that she must have torn it up with her bridge scores.’

‘I suppose she can get it replaced?’ Mr Freeling Poignton suggested.

Lefant hesitated for a moment.

‘To tell you the truth, he declared, ‘my own belief is that the admiral declined to give it to her. Julie hates to admit defeat, however. Hence her little story. That does not trouble me very much, though. My plans are all made in another direction. Tonight is the night of the fancy-dress ball here, and the admiral is coming. When he returns to the Magnifique, the drawings of the torpedo will be in my possession.’

Mr Freeling Poignton laid his hand for a moment on Lefant’s shoulder.

‘Marquis,’ he said, ‘I’ve been a little led into this affair by you. Remember, these aren’t my methods, and it’s only because I see just how difficult it is to make a move that I’m standing in. But let this be understood between you and me. The moment those plans are in your possession, a copy of them is to be handed simultaneously to the Government of every civilized Power in the world, so that everyone can build the darned things if they want to.’

‘Naturally,’ Lefant assented. ‘It is already agreed.’

‘No favourtism,’ Mr Freeling Poignton declared vigorously, ‘no priority. We steal those plans, not to give any one nation an advantage over any other, but to put every country on the same footing.’

‘It is already agreed,’ Lefant repeated.

Mr Laxworthy and Mr Forrest Anderson passed along, on their way back to the hotel. Courteous greetings were exchanged between the four men. Lefant watched them with a faint smile: Mr Laxworthy with a grey shawl around his shoulders, his queer little stoop, his steel-rimmed spectacles; Anderson in his well-cut tweeds, brightly polished tan shoes, and neat Homburg hat.

‘That,’ Lefant remarked, inclining his head towards Mr Laxworthy, ‘is exactly the type of English person whom one meets in a place like Hyères, at an hotel like this. One could swear that he lives somewhere near the British Museum, writes heavily upon some dull subject, belongs to a learned society, and has never had to make his own way in the world. He probably hates draughts, has a pet ailment, and talks about his nerves. He makes a friend of that red-faced fellow-countryman of his because he is attracted by his robust health and his sheer lack of intelligence.’

‘I dare say you’re right,’ Mr Freeling Poignton remarked carelessly. ‘What about luncheon?’

****

It was the night of the great fancy-dress ball at the Paradise Hotel.

Down in the lounge the tumult became more boisterous every minute. Automobiles and carriages were all the time discharging their bevy of visitors from the neighbouring hotels and villas. A large contingent of naval officers arrived from Toulon. The ball-room was already crowded. Admiral

Christodor, looking very handsome, led the promenade with Madame Bertrand, concealed under the identity of an Eastern princess. There were many who wondered what it was that he whispered in her ear as he conducted her into the ball-room.

‘It was careless of me,’ she admitted softly, ‘but I am really quite, quite sure that it was destroyed. It was with my bridge scores, and I tore them all up without thinking. You will give me another, perhaps?’

‘Whatever you will,’ he promised.

‘Listen,’ she continued. ‘To-night you must not leave me. There is a young Englishman—you understand?’

‘To-night shall be mine,’ the admiral answered gallantly. ‘I will not quit your side for a second for all the Englishmen who ever left their sad island.’

It was a gallant speech, but if Fritz, the concierge, could have heard it he would have been puzzled, for, barely half an hour later, a gust of wind blew back the cloak of a man who was stepping into a motor-car, and his uniform was certainly the uniform of an admiral in the French navy. Through the windy darkness the motor-car rushed on its way to La Plage. The men who waited in the pinnace rose to the salute. The admiral took his place in silence, and the little petrol-driven boat tore through the water.

‘The admiral takes his pleasure sadly,’ one of them muttered, as their passenger climbed on to the deck.

‘He has returned most devilish early,’ another of them, whose thoughts were in the café at La Plage, grumbled.

The admiral turned his head sharply.

‘I shall return,’ he announced. ‘Await me.’

Most of the officers of the Magnifique were in the ball-room of the Paradise Hotel. The admiral received the salute of the lieutenant on duty, and passed at once to his cabin. Arrived there, he shut the door and listened. There was no sound save the gentle splashing of the water near the port-hole. Like lightning he turned to a cabinet set in the wall. He pulled out a drawer and touched a spring. Everything was as he had been told. A roll of papers was pushed back into a corner of this compartment. He drew the sheets out one by one, shut the cabinet quickly, and swung round. Then he stood as though turned to stone. The inner door of the cabin,which led into the sleeping apartment, was open. Seated at the table before him was Mr Laxworthy.

Lefant was a man who had passed through many crises in life. Sheer astonishment, however, on this occasion overmastered him. His savoir-faire had gone. He simply stood still and stared. It was surely a vision, this. It could not be that little old-fashioned man who went about with a grey shawl on his shoulders who was sitting there watching him.

‘What in the devil’s name are you doing there?’ he demanded.

‘I might ask you the same question,’ Mr Laxworthy replied. ‘I imagine we are both—intruders.’

Lefant recovered himself a little. He came nearer to the table.

‘Tell me exactly what you want,’ he insisted.

‘First, let us have an understanding,’ Mr Laxworthy answered, ‘and as quickly as possible. For obvious reasons, the less time we spend here the better. The pinnace which brought you is waiting, I presume, to take you back. In this light you must still pass as an Admiral, but every moment you spend here adds to the risk—for both of us. My foot is on the electric bell, which I presume would

bring the Admiral's steward. You perceive, too, that I have a revolver in my hand, to the use of which I am accustomed. Am I in command, or you?'

'It appears that you are,' Lefant admitted grimly. 'Go on.'

'You hold in your hand,' Mr Laxworthy continued, 'the plans of the Macharin torpedo, the torpedo which is to make warfare in the future impossible.'

Then Lefant waited no longer. He flung himself almost bodily upon the little old man, who to all appearance presented such small powers of resistance. His first calculation was correct enough. Mr Laxworthy made no attempt to discharge the revolver which he held in his hand. In other respects, however, a surprise was in store for Lefant. His right hand was suddenly held in a grip of amazing strength. The fingers of Mr Laxworthy's other hand were upon his throat.

'If you utter a sound, remember we are both lost,' the latter whispered.

Lefant set himself grimly to the struggle, but it lasted only a few seconds! Before he realized what had happened, his shoulders and the back of his head were upon the table and Mr Laxworthy's fingers were like bars of steelupon his throat. He felt his consciousness going.

'You are content to discuss this matter?' his assailant asked calmly.

Lefant could only gasp out his answer. Mr Laxworthy released his grasp. Lefant breathed heavily for a minute or two. He was half dazed. The thing seemed impossible, yet it had happened. The breath had very nearly left his body in the grip of this insignificant-looking old man.

'Now, if you are willing to be reasonable,' Mr Laxworthy said, 'remember that for both our sakes it is well we do not waste a single second.'

Lefant's fingers stiffened upon the roll of papers, which he was still clutching. Mr Laxworthy read his thoughts unerringly.

'I do not ask you for the plans,' he continued grimly. 'You want them for your country. I am not a patriot. My country shall fight her own battles as long as they are fought fairly. These are my terms: put back those papers, or destroy them, and pay me for my silence.'

'You do not ask, then, for the plans for yourself?' Lefant demanded.

'I do not,' Laxworthy replied. 'They belong to France. Let France keep them. You have corrupted half the ship with Poignton's dollars, but it was never in your mind to keep your faith with him. The plans were for Germany. Germany shall not have them. If I forced you to hand them over to me, I dare say I could dispose of them for—what shall we say?—a hundred thousand pounds. You shall put them back in their place and pay me ten thousand for my silence.

'So you are an adventurer?' Lefant muttered.

'I am one who seeks adventures,' Laxworthy replied. We will let it go at that, if you please. Remember that you are in my power. The pressure of my foot upon this bell, or my finger upon the trigger of this revolver, and your career is over. Will you restore the plans and pay me ten thousand pounds?'

Lefant sighed.

'It is agreed,' he declared.

He turned back to the cabinet, and Laxworthy half rose in his seat to watch him restore the plans. In a few seconds the affair was finished.

'Monsieur the Admiral returns to the ball?' Mr Laxworthy remarked smoothly. 'I will avail myself of his kind offer to accept a seat in the pinnace.'

They left the cabin and made their way to the side of the ship where the pinnace was waiting, and the lieutenant stood with his hand to the salute. Secretly, the latter was a little relieved to see the two together. Once more the pinnace rushed towards the land. The two men walked down the wooden quay, side by side.

‘You will permit me to offer you a lift to the hotel?’ Lefant asked.

‘With much pleasure,’ Laxworthy replied, drawing his grey shawl around him. ‘I find the nights chilly in these open cars, though.’

Smoothly, but at a great pace, they tore along the scented road, through a grove of eucalyptus trees, and into the grounds of the hotel whose lights were twinkling far and wide. Lefant for the first time broke the silence.

‘Mr Laxworthy,’ he said, ‘the honours of this evening rest with you. I do not wish to ask questions that you are not likely to answer, but there is one matter on which if you would enlighten me—’

Mr Laxworthy waved his hand.

‘Proceed,’ he begged.

‘My little enterprise of this evening,’ Lefant continued slowly, ‘was known of and spoken of only between Mr Freeling Poignton and myself. We discussed it in the grounds of the hotel, where we were certainly free from eavesdroppers. I am willing to believe that you are a very remarkable person, but this is not an age of miracles.’

Mr Laxworthy smiled.

‘Nor is it the age,’ he murmured, ‘wherein we have attained sufficient wisdom to be able to define exactly what a miracle is. Ten years ago, what would men have said of flying? Fifty years ago even the telephone was considered incredible. Has it never occurred to you, my dear Lefant, that there may be natural gifts of which one or two of us are possessed, almost as strange?’

Lefant turned in his seat.

‘You mean—’ he began.

Mr Laxworthy held up his hand. ‘I have given you a hint,’ he said; ‘the rest is up to you.’

Lefant was silent for a moment.

‘Tell me at least this,’ he begged. ‘How the devil did you get on the Magnifique?’

They were passing along the front by the ball-room. Admiral Christodor and Madame Bertrand were sitting near the window. Laxworthy sighed.

‘The greatest men in the world,’ he said, ‘make fools of themselves when they put pencil to paper for the sake of a woman. . . . Take my advice, Marquis. Destroy that uniform and arrange for an alibi. In a few hours’ time there will be trouble on the Magnifique!’

Lefant nodded. His cocked hat was thrust into the pocket of his overcoat—he was wearing a motor cap and goggles.

‘There will be trouble,’ he remarked dryly, ‘but it will not touch you or me. As regards Madame Bertrand—’

‘She is innocent,’ Laxworthy assured him. ‘Nevertheless a pass on to the Magnifique is a little too valuable a thing to be left in a lady’s chatelaine bag.’

Lefant sighed.

‘One makes mistakes,’ he remarked.

‘And one pays!’ Laxworthy agreed.

The End